

INTERVIEW WITH JOE SPICCIANI
BY ED GROSSMAN AUGUST 15, 2002

MR. GROSSMAN: This is August 15, 2002. We are at the Fish and Wildlife Service in Juneau, Alaska. It is the Juneau Field Office. I have here today Joe Spicciati. He is the current Skipper of the motor vessel Curlew, which is a sixty-five foot T-boat research vessel stationed here in Juneau. My name is Ed Grossman. I am a staff biologist. We'll just go ahead and jump right into the interview. Joe I was hoping to ask you some personal information first, to get a little background; and then talk about your job here with the Service. First of all, can you tell me where you were born and when?

MR. SPICCIANI: Okay, I was born in New York City in 1946.

MR. GROSSMAN: And your parents, were they born here in the States also?

MR. SPICCIANI: My mother was born in New York City in 1910. She is still alive. My father was born in Lucca, Italy in 1902. He passed away when I was a child.

MR. GROSSMAN: What was your mother's maiden name?

MR. SPICCIANI: Puchi.

MR. GROSSMAN: What were your parent's jobs and education when you were growing up?

MR. SPICCIANI: My father died when I was four years old. At the time, he had a business with a partner and he made plaster cast statues. After my father died, my mother went to work as an Actuary at the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company in New York City.

MR. GROSSMAN: In your early years, how did you spend your time, growing up in New York City?

MR. SPICCIANI: I lived near Yankee Stadium. I went to many Yankee games. We also a summer house on Long Island and I spent much of my time on my neighbor's boats or out in boats that we owned.

MR. GROSSMAN: So in your grade school and high school years, were you working on boats then?

MR. SPICCIANI: Not exactly working. I went out with friends and relatives. We fished in the Long Island Sound.

MR. GROSSMAN: What kind of things would you fish for out there?

MR. SPICCIANI: Our favorite was Blue fish. Blue fish are an aggressive feeder and they come to the surface at night feeding off of small fish that were in the water. We'd just throw a plug into the pack and they'd fight over it. We could load the boat up pretty quickly.

MR. GROSSMAN: Was that for sport or for the table, or both? Did you sell things commercially?

MR. SPICCIANI: No, we usually loaded up the boat in about twenty minutes and then we went to the beach. There were usually lots of women on the beach waiting for us to give them fish!

MR. GROSSMAN: Were there any hobbies, events or books that influenced you most when you were at that age?

MR. SPICCIANI: I can't really think of any.

MR. GROSSMAN: What were some of your earliest jobs?

MR. SPICCIANI: I delivered clothing for a Dry Cleaner in my neighborhood from the time I was nine years old until well into high school. When I was in high school I worked as a Saturday extra for a New York City department store. They went out of business. It was B. Altman and Company. Then when I was in college, I worked during the summer time for a machine shop that made parts for helicopters mostly. They were contractors for Sikorski. It was sixty hours a week, six days a week summer time vacation for me!

MR. GROSSMAN: I know you mentioned fishing, and going to the ball games; were there other things? Were you hunting or traveling, into photography, or anything like that?

MR. SPICCIANI: In New York City, there weren't a lot of opportunities for that. Across the street from my house there was a schoolyard. We played softball there all summer, and touch football there all winter. I usually painted the markers on the field for football season. I even named the stadium after myself. My middle name is Caesar. We called it Caesar Stadium.

MR. GROSSMAN: Where did you go to high school?

MR. SPICCIANI: I went to a large Catholic boys high school in the Bronx. It was called Cardinal Hayes High School. He was probably the Archbishop of New York formerly,

before died. After that, I went to a Community College. I was drafted into the Marine Corps. When I got out of the Marine Corps, I went back to school at Hunter College. It was formerly a fancy girl's school on Park Avenue. But by the time, I entered it; it had become a co-ed institution. I didn't graduate. I left about a year before I could have graduated.

MR. GROSSMAN: What year did you graduate from high school then?

MR. SPICCIANI: In 1964.

MR. GROSSMAN: So, you left school because you were drafted?

MR. SPICCIANI: I went to a Community College and I was drafted.

MR. GROSSMAN: Out of the Community College?

MR. SPICCIANI: Well, I had dropped my courses to a level where I was no longer considered eligible to be deferred because of school, so I was drafted on St. Patrick's Day of 1966. I was drafted into the Marine Corps, which had just started to draft for the first time since the Korean War. So I spent two years in the Marine Corps. When I got out in 1968, I went back to Hunter College.

MR. GROSSMAN: What interests did you take up in college? Were you working on a particular degree, or just dabbling in different subjects?

MR. SPICCIANI: I went back to school because there was nothing else to do! So I never really took a great interest in things.

MR. GROSSMAN: Your time in the Marine Corps; I guess that was the Vietnam era, so did you go to Vietnam?

MR. SPICCIANI: No, I fought the War in North Carolina.

MR. GROSSMAN: So your duty station was there for the entire time?

MR. SPICCIANI: No, I was an Intelligence Clerk, the Marines didn't have enough time really, to take a person who was only under their wing for two years and train them and send them to Vietnam. So the Marines that get orders to go overseas right out of Boot Camp really never had enough time left to be sent to California for pre-WESTPAC training, I guess they called it. By virtue of the fact that I didn't get orders right out of Boot Camp kind of guaranteed that I probably would not go overseas.

MR. GROSSMAN: How many years were you in the Corps?

MR. SPICCIANI: Two years.

MR. GROSSMAN: Did that military service relate in any way to working for the federal government now?

MR. SPICCIANI: I never envisioned it. I was an Intelligence Clerk in an AMTRAC battalion. Amphibious tractors were a post-World War II method of not having LST's winding up on the beach like at Normandy and being a trap for troops that were trying to land on the beach. After World War II they built landing craft that could swim from the ships to shore and become support vessels on the beach because they were not only propelled on the water, but they had tracks where they could come up on the beach.

MR. GROSSMAN: Was there anyone in this time frame of growing up through school and the military that you would consider as a mentor or who helped in leading you to a life at sea?

MR. SPICCIANI: Not really, I never dreamed I'd have a life at sea!

MR. GROSSMAN: How about your family now Joe? How did you meet your wife?

MR. SPICCIANI: That's a very long story. But anyway, I met my wife in New York. She's English. We were married in 1982, and we have four children, three boys and a girl. My oldest is fifteen, and my youngest is nine.

MR. GROSSMAN: What do your children do now? I guess they are all in school?

MR. SPICCIANI: That's true. My oldest is now old enough to be a volunteer for the Fish and Wildlife Service, so he spent about forty days on the Curlew with me this season.

MR. SPICCIANI: That's a great experience. Why did you want to work for Fish and Wildlife Service to begin with?

MR. SPICCIANI: I fished in Alaska for twenty years before I took a federal job. Back in the 1980's I ran a large trawler. And back then the only thing that was left for us to do in the summer, since there was nobody buying bottom fish, was to be a tender for a cannery. We used to call it 'being a bus driver for dead salmon'. It wasn't so exciting. Not for a good boat. We discovered that the federal government chartered private vessels to do their research in Bering Sea and the Chukchi Sea, and also along the Aleutians. We started to bid the NOAA charters. For a couple of years I did the Chukchi Sea/Bering Sea crab survey. Another year I did the trawl survey along the Aleutians from Adak to Attu.

MR. GROSSMAN: So you were able to get familiar with government boats and operations?

MR. SPICCIANI: And government research.

MR. GROSSMAN: How did you hear about the position in Juneau for the job running the Curlew?

MR. SPICCIANI: At the time, I had given up a boat that I had run for sixteen years because the company wasn't putting what it needed to be into the boat to make in competitive. I ran a few factory trawlers that I was able to get a position on when the Captains needed a break. At the time I was looking for a position on a factory trawler where I'd have my own boat, where I'd be the premiere Captain on it. But at the time, I was looking for jobs, and I saw the Curlew job come up on the Internet. So I called here and I talked extensively to Evan Holmburg who was the Field Director at the time. And then also Dwayne Peterson who was pretty much running the boat. He was a Biologist, running the boat. I applied for the job. I guess the rest is history. They seemed to have wanted me when I called. I interviewed them!

MR. GROSSMAN: What year was it that you did come down here?

MR. SPICCIANI: I think originally the job went on the Internet in maybe April on 1997. I think that in July I was running a small factory trawler and they called me that boat to tell me that I could have the job. It took a few weeks for me to come in and settle my situation in Kodiak. Then I moved here, and I think I got on the boat one of the first days in August of 1997.

MR. GROSSMAN: So you've just passed your anniversary here. It has been five years?

MR. SPICCIANI: Right.

MR. GROSSMAN: Now, the Service didn't provide you with any training, or anything? You just took the job and melded right in from your past experience, right?

MR. SPICCIANI: That's correct, right.

MR. GROSSMAN: What are your daily duties then, with the Curlew? What would you point out about the daily duties of running and maintaining it?

MR. SPICCIANI: Basically, the Curlew is a one-man show. When folks come on my boat they become my crew. It's the smallest vessel I've ever run! People who are used to smaller boats look up to it as a big boat, but it's quite a manageable boat. It has a lot of

equipment on it that's been very well maintained. Just keeping up with that is not such a big task. Basically I operate the boat and take care of all of the equipment onboard. I also cook!

MR. GROSSMAN: And very well, I'll attest to that. Was there anything new to you in the way of Service equipment or sampling that you found interesting or different from all the heavy equipment that you worked with on trawlers?

MR. SPICCIANI: Yeah, I think, we don't do a lot of this type of work but basically we support dive operations. I have experience as a diver, but not with the government. I went through a dive course when I was building a boat in Mississippi. I think it was called Mississippi Divers. I am familiar with diving operations. I never bought diving equipment, and never dived beyond that. But it's nice to know what's going on under the water when you are tendering divers. A lot of interesting things have come up from work that we have done. We have supported the Army Corps of Engineers in assembling and disassembling their weather stations in Glacier Bay. We have supported the EPA in doing Banvene sampling; that's a sediment sample of the bottom. People from the Smithsonian Institute were here showing our folks how to set out traps for Green Crab, looking for invaders like Green Crab.

MR. GROSSMAN: Those are invasive species. How about animals? Have you worked with any animals since you have taken over?

MR. SPICCIANI: I can't remember anything beyond frogs.

MR. GROSSMAN: The frog studies. How about Sea Lions?

MR. SPICCIANI: Oh, I'm sorry, I forget.

MR. GROSSMAN: You've done so many. They must be routine now.

MR. SPICCIANI: Yes, it's a regular part of the last four years. We have been supporting the Alaska Department of Fish and Game who is a contractor for the National Marine Fisheries Service. And because NMFS doesn't have the personnel to look at the situation of Stellar Sea Lions, they contract with the ADFG to do southeast Alaska. Some of their partners are the University of British Columbia folks that do a lot of work. They are part of the North Pacific University Marine Mammals Consortium. They also get federal money to do that. But what we do every year is to do a brand, re-sight trip. We run from Juneau down the inside passage haul-out areas and we go to the outer coast to the main rookeries which are; a new one is Graves Rocks just part of Glacier Bay. We also go to a fairly large rookery called White Sisters, which is on the west side of Chicagof. Then we run down to the next major rookery. At one time it was the second largest in the world. It is off the Hazy Islands, which is twenty miles south of the

southern tip of Barinof. After that we went another hundred miles south on the outer coast to Lowry Island, which is part of the Alaska Maritime Refuge. Forrester is the major island but there is a small island south of it called Petrel, and then Lowry is a group of rocks and a small island north of Forrester, which is considered the largest Stellar Sea Lion rookery in the world. And what the Alaska Department of Fish and Game is looking at is animals that they had branded in 1994 and 1995. They are looking for those animals to see if they still exist and if they are pupping. Those animals became mature about three years ago and started pupping. In the last couple of years, because there is more money available for Stellar Sea Lion work, they have branded more animals. Last year I think 523 more animals were branded adding to the original 800 that they did in 1994 and 1995. This year they wanted to brand another 600, but, and I didn't do the branding; the ADFG research vessel, the Meddea had the branding setup, so he would follow me. He would come two days behind me and after we did our branding sites. He'd collect pups and hot brand them. I think they did about 350 animals this year. They had really bad weather and they were disappointed with that.

MR. GROSSMAN: Most of these places that you are describing are outer coast, gulf waters. It is probably like a little homecoming for you; getting a little ocean swell.

MR. SPICCIANI: And also, it's in the summer so the weather is quite pleasant. Although it can get pretty gnarly in the summer, and this year we've had unusually bad weather. In other years, I have done the Queen Charlottes with them too, but this year, the Meddea, which is a much bigger vessel; 110-foot boat, they did the Queen Charlotte leg of the trip and I was happy with that! They had terrible weather.

MR. GROSSMAN: How do you feel that the Service is perceived by people outside of the agency, related to your operation of the boat? Do you think the boat and the work it does is a positive thing in the eyes of the public?

MR. SPICCIANI: Well because we are such a small agency, and we never really get funding for anything unless a major incident occurs, we have very little "face" in the environmental community. We don't do a lot of public outreach out of the Juneau Field Office, the way a Refuge would. I know on Kodiak Island they have a Salmon Camp for the children and many things that they have funding for. For us, the face of the Service is the fact that we have our two T boats, which are beautiful boats. When artists see them; there's a woman in Wrangell who does beautiful paintings over nautical charts.

MR. GROSSMAN: Brenda Schwartz.

MR. SPICCIANI: Brenda Schwartz. Any time we are in Wrangell with either one of the boats we know for sure at Christmas time that there will be a Curlew or a Surfbird on a nautical chart in Annie Kells which is the premier art studio in the downtown. It will be selling for six or eight hundred dollars.

MR. GROSSMAN: What would you say has been the major impediment to you doing your job?

MR. SPICCIANI: I guess the fact that we are not well funded. We have a bigger boat in Homer. The Tigelax. They call it the Techla now. I am trying to figure out the proper Upick pronunciation. They are funded. They have Congressional funding and they get a certain amount of money to take care of that boat every year. We have no such luxury. So we've started taking our reimbursable money from other agencies, the ADFG Stellar Sea Lion folks, the US Army Corps of Engineers, Colt Region Research Engineering Lab, the Forest Service and National Park Service among others. We let them use our boat for what we consider to be a reimbursable amount. With that money we are able to stow maintenance money where we can actually take care of our boats and keep them up to speed. Eventually, if they need re-powering we'll have a stash of money to do that. So funding for us is a major thing. We've been creative on that and hopefully if we have to do a major rebuild on one of the boats that will work for us.

MR. GROSSMAN: So far, Joe, what would you say has been the high point of your job on running the Curlew?

MR. SPICCIANI: Well, working with wildlife biologists who are generally quite charming folks by comparison to running a factory trawler [is pleasant]. You have people on board who are quasi homeless and halfway between the homeless shelter and the local prison. These are the kinds of jobs that people who get out of jail go for. They have no place to go if they have no family support. So managing a hundred people on a factory trawler is not exactly a holiday. It's quite a lucrative job, but you certainly deserve every penny you get out of it! The Fish and Wildlife, by comparison, is my retirement. It's quite a pleasant group of people that I get to work with all of the time. And it's different. Every trip is different. When people look at my job they say, "People would pay to do that!" And that's probably true!

MR. GROSSMAN: With the highs, there is always some lows. What would you consider the low point of your career here so far?

MR. SPICCIANI: I've only been here for five years, but we have such a turn over of Field Supervisors, that we never know if they are going to try to reinvent the boat or something that actually works with their bogus ideas. I was recently as Kodiak Island Refuge and they have a new Manager, Leslie Kerr who is a marvelous person. I was telling her, "Oh yes, friends of mine say that we in Refuges follow our Refuge Manager's bogus ideas and we fund VIP trips!" Leslie said, "Yeah, I'm on my way to Katmi with a lot of VIPs to listen to their bogus ideas!" So, because of turnover we never know what's coming up for the boats. There is a lack of consistency with the management.

MR. GROSSMAN: What would you consider to be your most dangerous or frightening experience? Have you had any?

MR. SPICCIANI: I'm trying to think if I have any.

MR. GROSSMAN: Facing the paperwork?

MR. SPICCIANI: Coming back to town and finding out I've got a new Field Supervisor!
[Laughing]

MR. GROSSMAN: This leads into what was your most humorous experience since you've been here.

MR. SPICCIANI: I think probably interviewing for this job. I remember when I was called to be interviewed for the job, Dwayne Peterson who is probably one of the most marvelous federal employees that the government ever had. I had gotten to know him because I had nitpicked the office to death about the job to make sure there was something there. So when he did call me up to interview me, he had a very funny interview. He said, "Oh, biologists are a weird lot of people. How are you at taking care of different kinds of people?" I said, "I can take care of anybody. I used to bid the NOAA charters and I had quite a group of people." One time I had a doctor's wife on board who showed up in Adak about a day late with her Patagonia baggage and Patagonia everything and her own exercise machine. She didn't like the other women on the boat. I had them all in one four-person stateroom. She didn't want to be in there. So I put her on top of a chest freezer in the forepeak, and she was perfectly happy. Actually, I got to like her so much that during the interview I said, "Maybe you know her, Ellen Verocy, she lives in Juneau?" And he said, "Oh yeah, we know Ellen!" Then he said, "Here's the stickiest question, how do you feel about helping out with the cooking duties when we're out for a long period of time?" I said, "Oh, I'll probably do all of the cooking. Even when I ran a big trawler, I always put somebody on watch and I made the meal myself because I am a rather good cook. I'd rather eat my own cooking than somebody else's". Dwayne said, "Oh man, we need you!"

MR. GROSSMAN: What would you tell others about your career or the Service from your five years exposure to it?

MR. SPICCIANI: Working with biologists, and working with the government has it's own problems with their hiring process and getting real quality people, but generally the type of people that I have met in the Fish and Wildlife Service, and who do these jobs for a lifetime are very dedicated people to their mission. It's always a pleasure to work with people who have such a high standard of excellence in what they are trying to accomplish. We are working with people who have very high standards all of the time and that's very nice.

MR. GROSSMAN: What are your thoughts on the future, Joe? Not just for the Service, but for the boats? What do you foresee there?

MR. SPICCIANI: It's seems like there is more money for environmental work. And there are more problems with the environment, with the growth population on Earth and growing wealth. More people want to come and experience. People who work in big glass towers in New York City want to come and experience glaciers and the critters that are out here. It seems that this whole trend is not so beneficial to the critters themselves. This is the trust of the Fish and Wildlife Service, so this seems to be a growing need; to go out and keep a handle on what's going on between the action in the southeast mostly with cruise ships and tourists and a growing population of sport fishing boats and sport craft. There are a lot of yachts coming up from the lower forty-eight.

MR. GROSSMAN: It sounds to me like you feel that it's just getting busier and busier and there is more need for research to find the answers to that mix of people enjoying it but not harming it.

MR. SPICCIANI: That's certainly been true. In the last five years we have certainly gotten more and more. The demand for the work is great. And a lot of the work we have to turn down because we just don't have the time and space for it.

MR. GROSSMAN: Is there anything else you'd like to add Joe about the boats or your experiences on them?

MR. SPICCIAN: You know, the boats are, I know you describe them as a "T" boat. Actually, they are 1953 Korean War, U.S. Army built, steel boats that were built as support vessels for the troop ships mostly. They have really quality construction that you don't really get any more. I know the National Park Service T boat operator. He has kept his boat Korean War mint [condition]. He whole attitude is that things which were built at that time are quality. Everything after that, he wasn't so happy with! A lot of times when we look as these boats...I had the Regional Director down as a captive audience on the boat for a couple of hours because we took him for a ride down the Gastano Channel.

MR. GROSSMAN: Was that Dave Allen?

MR. SPICCIANI: Yes, Dave Allen. He looked at me and said, "These boats are getting to be fifty years old, how long do you think they'll last?" They are quality boats and they have been well maintained. They will last as long as we take care of them and keep up with them, unless they develop some more efficient means of propulsion on the water. I know people are experimenting with Catamarans. The Alaska Department of Fish and Game put in two million dollars into one for Kodiak, thinking that they could run around

at 30 knots, which would certainly save a lot of time. I've noticed that they are running that boat at 12 knots! The people they had told them that the "T" boat was paid for, and that the two million dollars could be better spent.

MR. GROSSMAN: Maintaining the "T" boat!

MR. SPICCIANI: Probably better. The boats are wonderful boats. And there are "T" boat aficionados around the world that when they see them, they want to come down and take pictures of them. Many people come on board and ask for tours. We are a service. We are happy to accommodate for the public.

MR. GROSSMAN: Well that's great! Thank you, Joe!